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For many people in Illinois, Asian carp--the gluttonous fish threatening to toss the Great Lakes ecosystem into disarray--are creatures seen only in newspaper and TV reports.

Not anymore.

"I hear people asking us all the time, 'Do you have the bighead carp or the silver carp here?'" Kurt Hettiger, senior aquarist at the John G. Shedd Aquarium, said Thursday about the two much-publicized species of Asian carp in the Illinois River. "Well, we do now."

On Thursday, Shedd Aquarium unveiled its new Great Lakes invasive species exhibit, featuring Asian carp, at an event during which U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) said he would propose legislation to prevent invasive species from entering the lakes in the ballast tanks of boats.

Asian carp worry biologists who study the Great Lakes because the fish devour up to 40 percent of their body weight each day, mostly by straining out tiny organisms that provide the base of the food chain for popular sport fish such as bass and walleye.

If the carp get into Lake Michigan, scientists fear they could end up causing more ecological and economic damage than other invasive species that have spread throughout the lakes, such as the sea lamprey and the zebra mussel.

Electrical barriers at the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal near Romeoville are currently operating as the last line of defense between Lake Michigan and the carp-infested Illinois River.

The purpose of the Shedd's new permanent exhibit, which features two bighead carp and a dozen silver carp caught in the river near Havana, is to enlighten visitors about the ecological

threats such fish pose and the importance of keeping them out of the Great Lakes.

Since the spring of 2004, the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in Chicago has featured a "Mysteries of the Marsh" exhibit that details the potential negative impact of Asian carp in Lake Michigan, museum officials said.

But unlike the Shedd's exhibit, the Notebaert exhibit does not feature live Asian carp. The Shedd Aquarium also can expect its exhibit to be seen by considerably more people than the estimated 161,000 who visited the Notebaert in 2005.

"About 2 million people come through our doors each year, and this is a great way to educate them about invasive species," said Roger German, the Shedd's director of public relations. "This is exciting for us."

The heart of the Shedd's invasive species exhibit features a pair of aquariums that portray the potential impact of Asian carp in Lake Michigan in simple, but powerful, terms.

In one, fish species common to the lake, such as bass and sturgeon, swim about in a lush, green environment. In the other, bighead and silver carp roam a stark environment devoid of vegetation or other fish species.

"This is a potential outcome, in which you can see the disappearance of some local fish," Hettiger said about a phenomenon that could greatly affect commercial and sport fishing on the Great Lakes, which is estimated to bring in \$4.5 billion to the region each year.

On Thursday, Kirk said the Great Lakes are under attack from invasive species such as Asian carp. Kirk said that when Congress reconvenes, he will push for legislation that requires all freighters to flush and inspect their ballast tanks before entering the Great Lakes.